

1989.11 Review of Manufacturing Consent and Necessary Illusions

[This was never published, though I sent a copy to Chomsky with my next letter to Chomsky (1989.11.29). A shorter version was published in *Looking for the Enemy* Ch. 3.6.]

Review of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon, 1988, and Chomsky, Noam, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, Pluto Press, 1989.

Noam Chomsky is the most famous linguist in the world and generally acknowledged as one of the greatest minds of the century. He has also been writing, voluminously and with an indefatigable commitment to rational and humane discussion, about American foreign policy for more than two decades. Still, his political writings are better known in Europe than in the United States, where they are ignored, with few exceptions, by the mainstream press. This is the fate of all dissident opinion in America that goes beyond the tolerable limits of debate and challenges certain fundamental assumptions, the "necessary illusions" one must at least pay lip service to in order to gain access to the mass media.

Chomsky and Herman (Professor of Finance at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania) follow in the courageous, unpopular tradition of men who dare to serve the state with their consciences as well as their heads, as Thoreau put it:

A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, serve the State with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated by it as enemies ("Civil Disobedience").

For those who serve the state with their bodies and their heads alone ("as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders"--and, we may add, journalists and scholars), "patriotism" means nothing more than subservience to the established political order, by which definition Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Eichmann, and Klaus Barbie were great patriots. Thus critics like Chomsky, regardless of the magnitude of their contribution in other areas (Bertrand Russell was another example), who dared from the beginning to judge American intervention in Vietnam by the same criteria as Soviet intervention in Afghanistan is judged today, were eliminated from the discussion as "wild men in the wings," as McGeorge Bundy referred to them in 1967. Even today, it is not permissible in the mainstream press to characterize the Vietnam War as anything other than a "tragic mistake," i.e. a well-intentioned failure, quite unlike the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan--the truth being, of course, that the situations were exactly analogous.

Herman and Chomsky present a number of meticulously documented examples of such media bias. With a devastating use of paired examples, they offer incontrovertible statistical evidence of how prestigious news organs such as the New York Times, Time, Newsweek, and CBS News systematically suppress or diminish the importance of state-sponsored atrocities in murderous regimes supported by the United States (like El Salvador and Guatemala), and greatly magnify the far fewer instances of government abuse in countries like Poland and Nicaragua. The reason for this bias is simply that the press conforms to the point of view of the US government.

The authors' comparison of press coverage of the Vietnam War before and after the Tet offensive in 1968 is a very insightful illustration of media conformism. Until 1968, there was virtually no criticism of American involvement in the war in the mainstream press, despite widespread popular opposition. After the Tet offensive, which convinced Johnson's advisors (most importantly, his intellectual henchmen such as Bundy, McNamara, and Rostow) that a military victory was not possible, the "anti-war" press suddenly appeared in full force, to the extent that right-wing institutions like Freedom House accused the media of having "lost the war." The image of a cantankerous adversary, of course, is precisely what the press likes to think it is, and what the government wants us to think it is. All is well, because we have a watchdog press, the "guardian of freedom," in Horace Greeley's phrase. The fact that these fearless watchdogs emerged only after the government had decided on disengagement is forgotten, if it was ever known. The truth is that the watchdog is more a performing dog, and will even play the role of scapegoat if called upon. When the people needed him, before 1968, he was docile; when the government needed him, after the change in policy in 1968, he dutifully bared his teeth. It would hardly have done to admit that the US had been defeated by one of the weakest nations on earth, that the government had driven the American people to the limits of tolerance and the verge of revolution. Far better to blame our "tragic failure" on the ferocious anti-war press, which in fact behaved exactly as the government wanted it to.

The fundamental premises and necessary illusions are bi-partisan. The illusion of an adversarial press, for example, is greatly strengthened by inter-party rivalries and scandals such as Watergate and Irangate, which may (in Nixon's case) or may not (in Reagan and Bush's case) result in the sacrifice of individual politicians. Occasionally these partisan rivalries will touch on important issues, as in the case of military aid to the Contras, but basic questions, such as why we support a murderous regime in El Salvador and oppose a relatively humane regime in Nicaragua, are simply never asked. If someone did ask, the answer, from Democrats and Republicans alike, would be that we are "defending freedom." This is the necessary illusion that the (our) government is benevolent. It can make mistakes, even tragic ones, as in Vietnam, but it is always well-intentioned. It is not acceptable in the mainstream press to point out, as Chomsky does (and as Thoreau did), that good intentions "are not properties of states, and that the United States, like every other state past and present, pursues policies that reflect the interests of those who control the state by virtue of their domestic power" (NI, 9).

Those who control the state are not necessarily or primarily politicians. American foreign policy is formed in the oak-paneled board rooms of the giant corporations, banks, and other financial institutions, which are not even necessarily American, but multinational. R. Buckminster Fuller refers to this primum mobile as "Grunch" (Gross Universal Cash Heist). We are not defending any freedom except that of Grunch to pursue its sole interest: profit. The mechanics of exploitation are well known in principle, but complicated in detail, and any attempt to elucidate them is silenced with hysterical warnings of the Red Peril. The necessary illusion here is that "what is good for business is good for America." The man in the street knows that what this really means is "what is good for Grunch is good for Grunch," and that Grunch does not include him, that he is not part of the corporate and intellectual elite who run the country, and that our electoral system has devolved into an elite game of musical chairs in which he is only a spectator. That is why barely 50% of the eligible population bothered to vote in the last presidential election; it is not apathy, but despair. Where is the candidate who will point out that the \$85 million in military aid given to El Salvador "aids" no one except that corrupt puppet government (to murder their own people) and, most of all, the corporate manufacturers of the weapons and other goods which are bought with this money? The money does not disappear. It is simply transferred from the pockets of American taxpayers to the bank accounts of weapons merchants and other corporations which are thus provided with a government subsidy at our expense--and, of course, at the expense of the people of El Salvador, who pay in blood. Where is the

presidential candidate who will tell the truth about the Vietnam War, this "tragic mistake" in which we "defended" the people of South Vietnam by killing a million of them and making a moonscape of their country? This noble enterprise, so passionately encouraged by our journalistic and scholarly elite ("the best and the brightest"), at least until 1968, cost the American people 58,000 lives and \$220 billion dollars. This money did not disappear either. It ended up in the hands of government contractors. Where is the presidential candidate who will erect an anti-war memorial, listing the names of the corporations that profited so much from this war, alongside the names of the 58,000 Americans who died?

The media are as much a part of Grunch as any other corporate entities. Herman and Chomsky point out that in 1986 there were 1,500 daily newspapers, 11,000 magazines, 9,000 radio and 1,500 TV stations, 2,400 book publishers, and seven movie studios in the United States. This would seem to indicate a basis for pluralism and independence, but the appearance is deceiving--another necessary illusion. Less than thirty giant corporations account for more than half of the newspapers and most of the sales and audiences in magazines, broadcasting, books, and movies. This is only the tip of the iceberg, and even that is not obvious. NBC does not advertise the fact that it is owned by General Electric. Underneath the hierarchy of formal ownership relations, however, is a gigantic web of interlocking directorships and shared stockholders (who are in many cases banks or other corporations), in which the only control or influence is wielded by relatively few people--namely those with the most assets. Media professionals are just as subject to pressure to conform within this corporate system as anyone else:

...those who do not display the requisite values and perspectives will be regarded as "irresponsible," "ideological," or otherwise aberrant, and will tend to fall by the wayside. While there may be a small number of exceptions, the pattern is pervasive, and expected. Those who adapt, perhaps quite honestly, will then be free to express themselves with little managerial control, and they will be able to assert, accurately, that they perceive no pressures to conform (MC, 304).

Conformity is not the same as censorship, which is crucial for understanding how "manufacturing consent" is possible in a relatively open society like the United States:

...the U.S. media do not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit--indeed, encourage--spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a system so powerful as to be internalized largely without awareness (MC, p. 302).

The authors also take pains to point out that theirs is not a "conspiracy theory":

Institutional critiques such as we present in this book are commonly dismissed by establishment commentators as 'conspiracy theories,' but this is just an evasion. We do not use any kind of "conspiracy" hypothesis to explain mass-media performance. In fact, our treatment is much closer to a "free market" analysis, with the results largely an outcome of the workings of market forces. Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power (xii).

As if determined to prove the accuracy of this prediction, establishment commentator Nicholas Lemann, the national correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, responds in the *New Republic* (Jan. 9/16, 1989):

This sounds reassuring, but it's misleading: Manufacturing Consent really is a conspiracy theory.

Chomsky himself comments in NI on several other gross distortions in Lemann's review, but this one also deserves special attention. After all, Lemann is representative of the journalistic elite which Chomsky and Herman are criticizing, and if this is what we can expect of the *New Republic*, once cringes to think how less "liberal" journals might react (though the usual reaction is silence).

It requires some Orwellian flips to follow this, but first we must note that it is Lemann who has the conspiracy theory. His theory is that Herman and Chomsky have a conspiracy theory, though he doesn't say what the theory is. If we examine his language a little more closely, we discover that he really thinks that Herman and Chomsky do not have a conspiracy theory--they are the conspiracy. This turns out to be none other than our old friend, the Red Peril: the International Communist Conspiracy. When Herman and Chomsky say that the press fairly openly serves the interests of government and corporate centers of power, Lemann renders this as "the press fairly openly serves the interests of its capitalist masters" (my italics). When they give examples of the press printing falsehoods and suppressing inconvenient truths, the better to maintain the government propaganda line, Lemann transforms this into "the better to maintain the party line." No amount of Orwellian acrobatics will make sense of this, since "capitalist masters" and "the party line" just don't jive, but the point is simply to raise the specter of the Red Peril and associate it by hook or crook with the antagonist--here the dastardly Herman and Chomsky.

Lemann demonstrates a few lines later how the conspiracy chimera is used as an evasive tactic, just as Herman and Chomsky predict. He summarizes two chapters of *Manufacturing Consent* (occupying 105 pages and 229 footnotes in the book) as follows:

When Nicaragua abrogates civil liberties, it's big news, but the much more serious abuses in Guatemala and El Salvador get much less attention here. Genocide in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge [from April 1975 through 1978] is covered more than genocide in Cambodia by the United States and its allies [bombing from 1969 through April 1975]. Guess why?

The sardonic "Guess why?" might as well have been "So what?"

That the US committed genocide and the American press failed to report it adequately elicit not so much as a whimper of protest from this conscientious patriot. Presumably, genocide is ok, as long as we do it, and the press should feel perfectly "free" to look the other way. Rather than address the issue, with "Guess why?" Lemann sends the reader off on a witch hunt, in search of the elusive conspiracy theory, which exists only in Lemann's mind--and quite nebulously at that.

In a final paroxysm of distortion, Lemann accuses Herman and Chomsky of advocating "more state control" in order "to move the press further to the left," though it is quite clear that the authors are calling for more public control:

Grass-roots and public-interest organizations need to recognize and try to avail themselves of these media (and organizational) opportunities [cable and satellite communications]. Local nonprofit radio and television stations also provide an opportunity for direct media access that has been underutilized in the United

States...Public radio and television, despite having suffered serious damage during the Reagan years, also represent an alternative media channel whose resuscitation and improvement should be of serious concern to those interested in contesting the propaganda system. The steady commercialization of the publicly owned air waves should be vigorously opposed. In the long run, a democratic political order requires far wider control of and access to the media. Serious discussion of how this can be done, and the incorporation of fundamental media reform into political programs, should be high on progressive agendas.

Lemann interprets as follows:

This assumes that the political order that controls the press won't be a conservative one, which is a stretch, but there are certainly plenty of examples around the world of a press controlled by a left-wing political order...But the temptation to view the mainstream press as a potential locus for liberalism outside the electoral system should be stoutly resisted. Not only is the prospect of a politicized press a little frightening, because the press is so powerful, and so much less accountable than government; it's also probably unattainable. For a variety of reasons, the mainstream press almost always responds to, rather than creates, the political mood.

The only person here suggesting that any "political order" should control the press is Nicholas Lemann. If he finds a "politicized press," one which is a locus for all political views, "frightening" and "unattainable," he has not only misunderstood Herman and Chomsky but also the First Amendment. A press which is "free" only to respond to the "political mood" is not free.

I wonder why Lemann finds the authors' disavowal of a conspiracy theory "reassuring." Is it reassuring to know that press conformity is structural rather than "conspiratorial"? Herman and Chomsky's "free market" analysis suggests that what amounts to the colossal failure of the press to do its job is a more or less natural development of our socio-economic system. I find this unsettling enough. Chomsky really doesn't have a conspiracy theory. As he wrote to me:

...I don't doubt that people in power consciously plan in their own interests, sometimes with others, hence technically a conspiracy. But my own feeling is that the major things that happen depend upon institutional structures and arrangements, and involve individual planning largely within these constraints. Thus, the board of managers of General Motors surely plans to maximize profit and market share, but it would be misleading to call this a conspiracy; it is an institutional imperative, and if they didn't do it, they would no longer be the board of managers. Our work on the media is far from a conspiracy theory. We in fact begin by drawing plausible conclusions from a guided free market model that is relatively uncontroversial, and then argue that the media behave much as should be expected on these assumptions.

I would add, however, that such a structural analysis does not exclude a conspiracy theory. Lemann will be glad to know that conspiracy theories much more plausible and concrete than the one he is playing with are alive and well, both in the United States and in Europe. It is quite possible to fit Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model within a conspiracy theory; in fact, it would be necessary in order to explain how a conspiracy of any magnitude could operate.

Censorship, for example, may be "largely self-censorship," as Herman and Chomsky say, but this does not mean there is no overt censorship. It is well known that the CIA requires its employees to submit to lifelong prepublication review. Reagan extended this practice to a

wide range of government and industry personnel who have access to classified information. By the end of 1983, according to the US General Accounting Office, 225,000 people had agreed to lifelong censorship. This means that any of these free Americans who decide to tell the truth are liable to prosecution. Any book which threatens to tell the truth about the CIA faces serious difficulties, as the publication history of Marchetti and Marks' *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, Wise and Ross's *The Invisible Government*, and Agee's *Inside the Company* will show.

Even after a book is published, attempts may be made to keep it from reaching a wide audience, or from being distributed at all. Herman and Chomsky don't mention it here, but their earlier joint work, later published in expanded form as *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (South End, 1979), was kept from being advertised or distributed by the conglomerate (Warner Brothers) that owned the original publisher. Another technique to prevent circulation of a book is to buy up all the copies. L. Fletcher Prouty has told me that his book *The Secret Team* (Prentice-Hall, 1973), to my mind the best book ever published on the CIA, began to disappear when Prentice-Hall was going into its third printing and Ballantine had already distributed 100,000 copies of the paperback edition. Prouty learned later that the entire 3,500 copies that arrived in Australia were bought by an "Australian Army Colonel," and that a publishing executive secretly working for the CIA had ordered the demise of the book. The responsible editors at Prentice-Hall and Ballantine were fired, and despite continuing interest, all further inquiries about re-publishing the book have eventually been stifled. (Fortunately, the book is still to be found in libraries.)

We need not look very far to find the infrastructure of a conspiracy theory that will accomodate Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model--and much more. The CIA is a conspiracy, and we do not need a theory to know that it exists. Its Directorate of Operations ("covert action") would fit anyone's definition of the word. The CIA is the most powerful secret police force in the history of mankind, and as far removed from the ideals of individual freedom and democracy as one can get. It is above the law, since "national security" is the ultimate priority, and by law there is only one man who can overrule the decision of the Director of Central Intelligence as to what constitutes a breach of national security: the President. Anyone looking for a conspiracy need look no farther than this. This is not the place to go into detail, but suffice it to say the following (none of which we will hear about in the New York Times or on any of the television networks): there is substantial evidence linking the CIA to the assassination of President Kennedy; Kennedy was antagonistic to the CIA; Kennedy wanted to withdraw from Vietnam, where the CIA had been waging secret war (as well as in the rest of Indochina) for a decade, and had already ordered the first troop withdrawals (a decision that was secretly reversed by Johnson); an ex-Director of the CIA (Dulles) was on the Warren Commission; and--skipping up to the present--another ex-CIA Director (Bush) is now sitting in the oval office. This is only the barest outline of a conspiracy theory, but it's enough.

Not even the slightest adumbration of the significance of these observations will be discernible in the American mass media. The rest of the "free world" is less constrained--and more informed. In November 1988, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President Kennedy, the American public was treated to a number of sanitized television histories, none of which even hinted at the possibility that Kennedy's murder was a coup d'État engineered by the CIA (in collusion with the Mafia). A British Central Independent Television documentary which did, and was shown in 30 countries, has to this day not been televised in the United States. There are a number of excellent books which point to similar conclusions (most recently Robert Groden and Harrison Livingstone's *High Treason*, and Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*), but this is a numbers game: how many people will read the books, and how many people would see the film? We have a "free press," but the freedom one has to reach a politically significant mass audience is a quite different question.

Herman and Chomsky have shown--definitively, for all who will listen--that the mainstream press is not doing its job, that it is fully entangled in the web of illusions that are necessary for the maintenance of state and corporate power. Beyond that, we may well ask--though the answer will be long in coming--if there is a spider in the web.

